Mr. OBEY. Mr. Speaker, Earth Day is a great day to call attention to the many environmental and public health challenges that face everyone on the planet. It is also a great opportunity to reflect on the history of the Earth Day movement and to pay tribute to one of recent history's great statesmen and founding father of the movement, our former Senator from Wisconsin, Gaylord Nelson.

Today, people all around the nation are celebrating Earth Day. Local communities have organized events to, once again, bring to the public eye the importance of working together to improve our quality of life and to protect our natural heritage.

However, without the leadership of a passionate public servant from Wisconsin, we would no be breathing air as clean. We would not be swimming in lakes, rivers and streams as safe. We would not be enjoying the beauty of public lands as special as those we were able to protect under laws he championed. We would not be holding Earth Day celebrations each year on April 22nd.

Earth Day was "born" in September, 1969. Senator Gaylord Nelson was invited to give a speech at a conference held at the Seattle Science Center. In his speech, he suggested that, just as Americans had been involved in "teach-ins" to protest the Vietnam war, the country should also set aside a day to call attention to the environmental problems facing our planet and to demand that Congress address those important issues. He expressed his firm belief that the American people needed to put their leaders "on notice," and he encouraged folks everywhere to explain to their elected officials that they were tired of empty promises. It was time for real action on the environment.

At that same conference, he suggested that in the spring of 1970, there should be a nation-wide grassroots demonstration on behalf of the environment, and he encouraged the listening public to participate. Wire services carried the story from coast to coast, and as history showed, the response was overwhelmingly positive.

Within hours of that Seattle speech, telegrams, letters and telephone inquiries from across the country poured into his Senate office. His phones in the Capitol were literally ringing off the hook, as people called in to say that they wanted to organize Earth Day celebrations in their own communities. It was obvious that Senator Nelson had struck a chord, and that this was an idea whose time had come. Over the next four months, the calls and letters increased in number until his Senate staff was overwhelmed by the response. At that point, he decided to hire several talented students to help organize and respond to peoples' calls to action.

Senator Nelson himself has said that no one individual or group had either the time or the resources to organize and coordinate all of the activities of the 20 million people and thousands of schools, community groups and others who made the first Earth Day such a success. Instead, he credits the many dedicated people in communities across the country, that were sparked to organize at the local level in response by his speech, and send a loud and clear wake-up call to their elected officials on the issue of environmental health. While his speech had resonated with Americans everywhere, and was clearly a catalyst for change, he insists that no single individual was responsible for organizing the first Earth Day. Rather, Earth Day 1970 literally organized itself. It is, to this day, a stellar example of how individuals can make a difference and literally change history.

In April 1970, twenty million people spoke out for the environmental health of the planet—rich people and poor people, young and old, farmers and city dwellers, Republicans and Democrats—stood together for the planet. A week-long series of Earth Day events in Philadelphia drew over 30,000 people to Independence Mall on April 21, 1970 and an estimated 75,000 people to Fairmount Park on Earth Day itself, April 22. People came in droves to listen to the keynote speaker and author of the landmark 1970 Clean Air Act, Senator Edmund Muskie.

Following that initial activism, thousands more attended events at every college in that region during that week. The organizers of those events accomplished this without having any contact with Senator Nelson, his staff, or any other national coordinating body. Like ripples in a pond, thousands of people in other communities across the country organized their own local Earth Day events in 1970 until the movement was 20 million strong. Today, local, ad hoc Earth Day groups continue to organize their own events on April 22, focusing on the local, regional, national or global issues that matter most to them. That was and continues to be the strength and power of Earth Day.

As Senator Nelson is fond of pointing out, it is the activist students and folks in communities across the country, and their actions as a group rather than those of any one individual, who ensured the environment finally took its place as a priority issue on the national political agenda. They made possible the dramatic environmental gains of the past 34 years. We are all in debt to that generation of young people—grade school, high school, and college—who supplied the energy, enthusiasm, and idealism that made Earth Day such a spectacular success. Earth Day was and is a pluralistic event in which every individual and every group that wants to be involved is able to do so, and claim "ownership" of the day.

Twenty years later, Earth Day has gone global and more than 200 million people from 141 countries participated in the last celebration. However, the millions who rallied on that first Earth Day are what gave Senator Nelson's simple idea its power. And in 1995, while celebrating the 25th anniversary of Earth Day, President Bill Clinton appropriately honored Senator Nelson's timely contribution to the movement by presenting him with the Medal of Freedom.

We can all be proud and grateful for the contribution of one of Wisconsin's great statesmen, the thoughtful and provocative founding father of Earth Day, Senator Gaylord Nelson.